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Percy O. Vera interview for a Wright State University History Course

Lucy Putnam

Percy O. Vera

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Interview Summary

The entire interview has been transcribed. The interviewee was Percy Vera, a resident of Northwest Dayton, Ohio. Interviewer was Lucy Putnam, a graduate student in the Public History Program at Wright State University. The interview was conducted in Mr. Vera's dining room at his house on February 26, 2003. The interview lasted approximately 1 1/2 hours.

I. Background Belize

- A. Description
- B. Industry

II. Immigration (1944)

- A. Settled in Lebanon, OH
- B. Philadelphia, PA
- C. Move to New York, NY

III. Graduation from high school (1953)

IV. Enlistment in Marine Corps (1953)

V. Going to college (1957-63)

VI. Profession

- A. Sinclair Community College
- B. Economics Professor

VII. Civil Rights (1960's)

- A. Martin Luther King assassinated
- B. Dayton riot of 1966

VIII. White flight in Dayton

IX. Police interaction / harassment

- A. Incident in Kentucky
- B. Robert Barbie incident

X. The "good life"

Interview Summary

The interview took place in the home of the interviewee, Percy Vera. Mr. Vera is a retired professor of economics at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, OH. During the interview he gave a description of his native country, Belize, and the reasons his family immigrated to the United States. He discussed his enlistment in the Marines after high school graduation and his military career.

"And I looked at the Navy recruiter and I said 'Sir, if you were to sign me up today, how long would it be before I got in boot camp?' And he looked at me and said 'Son, you're talking about a waiting list of at least a year. Probably eighteen months.' I stood right up, shook his hand... Right behind him was the Marine recruiter. Walked back there, sat down, asked him the same question, he said 'Son, you'll be in boot camp in two months.' I said, 'Get the papers out'."

Upon discharge from the Marine Corps, he attended the University of Dayton and graduated in 1963.

"Go to U.D. and I have never regretted that decision. I have thought about it often and how life might have turned out for me getting a degree from an Ivy League university...but I've never regretted it. Never once. And I've always been proud of attending the University of Dayton."

He talked about the Civil Rights Movement in Dayton, specifically key events such as the march held after Martin Luther King was assassinated.

"And as we crossed the bridge, I started to look up and on top of the Montgomery County Building I saw the first marksman, police marksman with high powered rifles. Down the street from the Montgomery County Building was the police station. And they had people on top. Catty-corner from that was the old Post Office on the other side of the YWCA, on Third Street. And they had marksman. On every high building, they had police marksmen, in case someone got out of sorts, riots started..."

Mr. Vera talks about the state of race relations in Dayton specifically the experiences with police officers. I asked him what it was like to be stopped by a police officer for no apparent reason other than racial.

... I was a graduate student at the time. I had just finished teaching class and had an armload of books and papers... One of them said "Hey, boy, c'mere. I went over and I said 'yes sir what can I do for you.'" And he saw me with an armload of books and he says 'what are you doing over here?' and the thought that occurred to me was "well I'm stealing books" but I didn't want to say that. (laughter)

Mr. Vera discusses the change he feels has taken place in viewing the "good life". As a young man a good life centered around material things. As he gets older a good life centers around his family and community.

Transcription of interview with Percy Vera on February 26, 2003.
Interviewed by Lucy Putnam.

LP = Lucy Putnam, interviewer

PV= Percy Vera, interviewee

LP: My name is Lucy Putnam. This is tape one, side A. It is February 26, 2003. I am sitting with my interviewee, Percy Vera at the dining room of his house in Northwest Dayton, Ohio. Let's start off with when you were born.

PV: I was born in Belize. Punta Gourda, Belize, which is at the south end of Belize. and Belize is a country that is on the, I guess you would say, on the southeast border of Mexico. It's attached to Mexico by Vera Cruz. And then you go on down and there's Honduras and Guatemala and so on. My mother and father raised my, at least the first eight years of my life in Don Griga which is in the middle of the country. It's a very small county. It's about, from the last census I believe, about a quarter of a million people total. That's it. The major, I suppose, economic

(Phone rings...)

They are looking for my son...anyway, right now the major economic boost to the country would probably be tourism now. Because there is tremendous fishing there, there is snorkeling. It's about an hour from Cancun, Mexico, by air. A great place to visit. A very poor country, not the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. That honor belongs to Haiti. At this point the country is connected by a major highway that runs from north to south. There is still some difficulties connecting all the major cities by highway unless you travel the main highway. As far as I know, the exports are going to be in the fishing area, a lot of tropical fruits of one kind or another. That's pretty much about it. I would say right now probably the average income for the country is around \$3,000 a year.

This is where the United States was 50 years ago when I was growing up. It's still struggling and my guess is down the road it's going to do pretty well. But there has to be an enormous amount of effort on the part of the political leadership particularly to try to bring more either soft industry because the people are dead set against heavy industry. Because of the pollution and all of the problems that usually come with that. Soft industry in the field of electronics and so on would probably be good. Now, educationally a youngster can only go through the equivalent of high school education. Then they have to move out of the country if they want to go to college. Many of them wind up here in the United States and some don't go back, unfortunately. Those who do can do pretty well for themselves economically because they can become a member of the government and civil service in their own communities and so on.

LP: Is that what you did? Did you come here for college?

PV: No. In fact I emigrated here with my parents when I was eight years old. Because my father, who is also named Percy, met a gentleman on one of his many travels throughout the world in Mexico City, of all places. He was at that point in time a merchant marine and he got an opportunity to travel and make a little money and take care of his family and so on... The subsequent outcome was the gentleman who was, I believe, the CEO of a major company down here in Cincinnati. They sort of got into a conversation and he asked my father if he was interested in coming to the United States and he would sponsor him if he did and my father said definitely. Early on, early in World War II, my father had worked with the U.S. Army, down in the Panama Canal. That's how he was able to move in and out of various situations. So in 1944, we came. Some interesting sidelights....Our family, along with a number of other families, left in the middle of the night.

LP: Why is that?

PV: Perhaps because it was easier to travel and my guess is that, it was never verified by my parents, we rode a small ferry boat and I think the gentleman who owned the ferry boat was smuggling people into the United States through Mexico. We weren't being smuggled. We were legitimate.

LP: You were good cover?

PV: We had our passports, we had our visas. We had the whole shebang. We did not come without verification. But I think a number of the other people who were with us were being smuggled in, but that's another story.

LP: So it was you and your parents?

PV: My parents, myself and my younger brother who passed away back in 1980, I believe. And my sister was born here, right down here in Lebanon. But in any case, we came in and the other sidelight was, and it was a major irony to me, and I didn't realize this until many, many years later. In fact after I was an adult, I married and had children, and one day I was cleaning out the ...my father's effects...'cause my mother had told me to take his papers and so on. I got a hold of his passport and I looked through the passport and the date that was stamped on the passport, on coming into the United States, from Laredo, Texas, was June 6, 1944.

LP: D-Day?

PV: D-Day. Exactly. At the exact same time that D-Day was occurring. Six o'clock in the morning. And I thought that was great. In any case, we moved to Laredo, Texas with a family that took us in for awhile. We immigrated up here to Lebanon so my father could fulfill his contract with the gentleman from Cincinnati. After a year of working with him, in fact it was more like two years, then he said you can go where ever you want to go and my father had always wanted to go to New York, I suppose, so we went on. We stayed with an immigrant family from Belize as well in Philadelphia for about six months and then we got to New York in 1947, I believe. And that's where I continued my grade school education and subsequently my high school education.

LP: In Philadelphia?

PV: In New York. And I graduated from Cardinal Hayes High School in 1953. Again, so many ironies as I look back at that time. Four years before I graduated, Regis Philbin graduated from the same school. *(Laughter)* Six years after I graduated, Martin Scorsese graduated from the same school. In fact he was a classmate of my brother's. *(Laughter)* And of course, in between, we graduated a number of judges and lawyers and celebrities of one kind or another. I had a great time growing up in New York. It was a marvelous time. It was the time when, in fact, well the Civil Rights Movement had been in place before that but it really wasn't galvanized until Martin Luther King was practically dragooned into leading the march in Montgomery because of Rosa Parks and the incident and all of that. He eventually became a national figure and of course eventually won the Nobel Prize.

{Phone rings}

PV: And so it's been an interesting, interesting life in terms of where I've been and things that I've done and so on. In fact after I graduated from high school in '53....

LP: Then where did you go?

PV: It was during the first recession. Post World War II recession. Very, very severe. Nobody could get jobs. It was not likely that a 17 year old kid from Harlem was going to get a job in a bank, like my high school advisor told me to do. Which is another interesting episode in my life, cause I've never forgotten that because at this particular school, Catholic high school, one of the best in the nation, every senior had to have a "sit-down" of 15 to 30 minutes with the school advisor to talk about your future, to talk about where you want to go, talk about what you want to do.

LP: Kind of an exit interview?

PV: And he asked me...I believe his name was Fr. Connelly anyway...he asked me what I wanted to do and I said I'd like to go to college and I've already sent away letters to get applications and so forth. Of course you should always start that at the beginning of your senior year not in the middle of it. in any case, he looked at me and said Percy, you're not college material. You need to think about your future in a more realistic way. What you ought to do, is go get yourself a job at a bank, marry a nice Catholic girl and have a bunch of kids. Well, I did two of the three things that he suggested. I married a Catholic girl and had a bunch of kids. Okay, Father, I tell you what. I don't know how I'm going to get there but I'm going to go to college. And when I get my degree, I'd like to come back here, if you're still here, and show you my degree. That I am worth something. That I can do something.... beyond and the day after graduation, on June 27, 1953, another day I won't forget. We graduated from St. Patrick's Cathedral...all the catholic schools in Manhattan graduated from there. This year it's going to be on a Saturday, back then it was on a Sunday. We had 850 guys in that graduating class. And the very next day, got up went looking for work. Traveled all over New York, started down in the Battery and worked my way up towards City Hall and all the various offices there that were doingwell they were headhunters essentially...they sent you out on and everybody said "what can you do?"

{Phone rings}

PV: Recent high school grad....not much. So I finally, after putting in so many applications, took the subway back uptown and got off at 42nd street on Broadway and again it's something that I will never forget, as I was walking uptown from 42nd street, I stopped at the corner of 43rd street and Broadway and right across the street from where I was, I was on the east side of Broadway, on a little island....if you ever see the NBC Nightly News...okay there is the New York Times building with the ticker tape and they take a pan shot down below and there's this recruiting station. It's very high tech now. It is the very same recruiting station that I went into in 1953 and...but then it was a tin corrugated, and they had desks and typewriters and had to write everything down, cause it wasn't computerized and so on. And stood on that corner for about....it had to be five minutes, it seemed like five minutes anyway, cause I just stood there and said...okay. I walked across the street and the very first door on the east side of the building, right to your left was the Navy recruiter. And I hadn't thought about what I was going to do, what military branch...I just sat down cause nobody was there. And I looked at the Navy recruiter and I said 'Sir, if you were to sign me up today, how long would it be before I

got in boot camp?' And he looked at me and said 'Son, you're talking about a waiting list of at least a year. Probably eighteen months.' I stood right up, shook his hand and said 'thank you for talking with me'. Right behind him was the Marine recruiter. Walked back there, sat down, asked him the same question, he said "Son, you'll be in boot camp in two months." I said, "Get the papers out". (Laughter) So I filled out the forms and so on, and he looked at it and he said "You're only 17." I said "Yes, sir." I could have lied, I could have said I was eighteen because I didn't have to show any proof of age. Is that a problem? He said "well you're going to have to get your parents to sign for you." I said well I can do that, are you going to be here long? How late do you stay open?" He said "we close at 6 o'clock." "I'll be back in an hour," this is like 1 o'clock in the afternoon. I had beating my feet all day trying to find work. Got back on the subway, ran uptown, my mother fortunately was home washing clothes. She was in the back yard hanging up clothes, went back, and said, Mom, I have a great opportunity and I can go to college when I finish this obligation. She said what? I said "I'm going to join the Marines but I need your permission to go." She hesitated a moment, and I didn't know what she was going to say, she said but "son, there's a war on, you could get killed." Well yeah, but I doubt that... Of course when you are 17 you say stupid things like that.

LP: The invincibility of youth.

(laughter)

PV: But shouldn't you talk to your father? Well, we can talk to him when he gets home from work. But I need this right now 'cause I told this sergeant I'd be back in a hour. She said well okay. She started crying. I said mom I'll be okay. Just think I'll finish my four year hitch and I got four year college education waiting on me free of charge. The GI Bill is going to pay for the whole thing. I'll be back in an hour. Went back down to 43rd street, and walked in, and the sergeant looked surprised because I guess he's had a number of these kinds of visits from youngsters, who go home and of course they never come back. He said "I didn't think you would be coming back" I said "I gave you my word. We keep our word in my family. I'm here. Here's the paper. My mother signed it." he said okay let's complete the rest of the paperwork. And it was that day that I became a Marine. Two months later, we were taking the oath of office at City Hall, the mayor administered to us, and about a week earlier than that we were on one of the old early television game shows, I think it was The Price Is Right, or something like that. I think it was Bob Barker, the same guy is still doing it. We were the special guests and so on. Then August, 1953 I was off to boot camp. On the way to boot camp, we took a train, there was a special train for us, I got up in the middle of the night and said

"what in the world have I done?" But it wasn't that bad. When we got off the train in Sumter, South Carolina, which is like ten miles from the gates of Paris Island. I looked down the tracks and looked back at the tracks and that was the town. That was it. *(Laughter)* The biggest thing in town was the bus station. I said "Okay well, we can handle this." We were off. 14 weeks of hard labor, but

LP: In August in South Carolina?

PV: In the middle of the summer and the flies were as big as bats....

(Rosalind, his oldest daughter is asking him a question via written note.)

PV: But I managed.....and I thought, having been an athlete...ran track, played football, the whole thing...that I was in shape. I wasn't in shape., but when I came back 14 weeks later...I was in shape. The final thing that we did in boot camp was a 10 mile forced march with full knapsack and everything that you owned. The first time was a five mile forced march and guys were dropping out like flies...I fell out for a little while and got myself back up and staggered the rest of the way. But the last exercise we did before graduation was a 10 mile forced march...and we all made it. We started with 220 guys when we first got there and wound up with ...like 100, maybe 110 at the most. Cause many of them got washed out or put in jail or sent back or whatever. I have to say that I had some of the greatest experiences that I've ever had in my life as a Marine. And I served 8 years. 4 years of active duty. 2 years active reserve and 2 years inactive reserve before I was discharged.

LP: Where were you stationed?

PV: Primarily Camp LeJuene ...because I was supposed to go to Korea initially. Those were my initial orders right after boot camp...they handed you your orders...go home for 30 days then report to your next duty station. I was supposed to go to Korea...because we kept a ...not a battalion, well it might have been a battalion of marines there after the truce was signed. Technically we are still at war with Korea...North Korea...because we never signed a peace agreement. But I wound up at....

{Rosalind enters bringing a photo.}

PV: That's my eighth grade graduating class.

Percy Vera gets up and leaves the table. Then returns.

PV: I can't think of a single incident, even the negative incidents, in the Marines that I went through as being bad. My whole demeanor I think always was and continues to be...You look forward, you don't look back and you slough off small slights. But I had a great time as a Marine. I'm a very proud United States Marine. When I talked about the Marine Corps; I talk about "us," because it's a family.

LP: Semper Fi?

PV: That's it. And I went various places. I never went to ...like Japan or Korea, cause they wouldn't let me go to Korea. Cause I was only 17 when I got out and I think somebody discovered that and said ...can't go there.
(laughter)

Rosalind has handed him a note.

PV: Officer's Club? I don't know. It'll come to me.

LP: So after you did your four year stint, you went to college?

PV: And that was funny how that happened because after I left to go to boot camp...

LP: Originally? When you were 17?

PV: Yes. All of these letters that I had sent and so on to various colleges and so on and filled out all the applications. They all came back and every one of them accepted me. I got accepted to U.D. [University of Dayton], Villanova, Boston College, Holy Cross and a couple of others that I applied to. So I wrote the admissions officer back at all 7 places. I said I got a previous obligation that I can't get out of.

LP: Otherwise engaged?

PV: And the only....No I wasn't drafted. that was after I got out. I'll tell you about that....The only college admissions officer that wrote back was Brother John Dreroux (?) at U.D. In the letter he says 'we have a space in the freshman class of 1957, (this is 1953) waiting for you.' Every year for 4 years, that man wrote to me and said we still got the slot waiting on you. None of the others wrote me back after I wrote them and told them what happened. I said "well, I guess I know where I'm going to go." While I was there, I think it was three years, I ran track for the base team and we traveled all over the country, various track meets and so on. And my coach, my last coach there, I think he was a lieutenant... he got his discharge and he took the head coaching job at Colgate, Colgate

University. A couple of months after he was gone, I get a letter from him saying...and there was a cover letter from the president of the university...and I said what is going on? And he said 'you have a full track scholarship to Colgate University if you want to come. And I agonized about that for a while...cause early in 1957, I had, in fact it was January, I had taken leave and gone up to New York to take my SAT's. Got the results back and of course had them sent to all the schools that had turned me down and a couple of others. And I wound up with a score of 1340 combined which today would get me into Harvard. But back then they were very selective. 1340 wouldn't get you in anywhere if you were black, I suppose, but I know a number of people that did in fact go on to higher education with lesser scores. But those were the times.

LP: Refresh me. 1340 out of 1600?

PV: 1600, yes. But those were the times we were living in. I didn't realize even then what the significance of that kind of a score was. I thought well, I didn't do very well then. Until I brushed up on the SAT's and the combined total of 800 [verbal points] and 800 [math points] is 1600. That's the most you can get. So if you get anything over 1000, you're doing pretty well. You're a pretty bright kid. And I said I guess it doesn't really matter. So after about a month of agonizing over this track scholarship offer, I finally wrote back the coach and I said, Les, I can't do this. I'd love to come. I appreciate the honor and I really, really am grateful for your confidence in me and my abilities but being Catholic, I just have to go follow this.

LP: "This" would be what?

PV: Go to U.D. and I have never regretted that decision. I have thought about it often and how life might have turned out for me getting a degree from an Ivy League university...but I've never regretted it. Never once. And I've always been proud of attending the University of Dayton.

END OF SIDE "A", TAPE ONE

LP: So, you went to the University of Dayton?

PV: I went to the University of Dayton. Went back home to New York, got married and came back...restarted my sophomore year...she was getting ready to be born... (pointing at Rosalind). So in the middle of my sophomore year, I dropped out because I had to take care of a family now. Had a wife, had a baby coming. I got a job at Lloyd Lewis Appliances which was on 5th street across from the old "Y". It's right close to Shannon Avenue or Shannon Street if you go by the... it's in the

area now known as the Dunbar.... Dunbar area, Wright Dunbar area and shortly thereafter I got a job at DESC. The old DESC.

LP: What is that?

PV: Defense Electronic Supply Center, which is in Kettering right across the street from WHIO. It was an old supply depot for the Air Force. Continued...went back to school, even after the dean...when I went to him and told him that I had to drop out....and he said "I'll never see you again." I said "you'll see me. I'll be back." it took me a year to do it but I went back after I'd saved some money. Instead of graduating with the class of '61, I graduated with the class of '63. And we are celebrating our 40th reunion this year. But anyway shortly after that the School of Business began the MBA program...brand new...And I said I'm going to get my Master's Degree. Now after I'd finished all of that I got hired at Kroger's as an assistant manager at the Westtown store. That's where the branch office of the Post Office is now....right in that same spot. Left DESC...went to work at Kroger's...had a few problems with them...left after 3 years, 2 1/2 years, something like that and kicking around for a while I went to work for NCR for a bit...for about maybe 8 months...then I went back to the government and wound up at Wright-Patterson. In area "B"

LP: What did you do?

PV: I was a budget analyst. My responsibilities were to check over any contracts the Air Force had with major contractors for weapons systems, for airplanes, whatever. And I'd check and make sure the numbers were right, within the guidelines of how the Air Force wanted to spend its money and so on. I had, which I understood later, complete autonomy to accept or deny any contract that was either good or not so good in my estimation after I checked the numbers and made sure they were right that exceeded perhaps the planned out expenditure. I remember one incident, it was so funny, some general, a one star general, had tried to rush this particular contract through for some kind of, or part of a weapon system that later turned out to be not so good. And I checked the numbers and they didn't make sense and I went to my supervisor and I said Glenn, this doesn't make sense. He said, "if you don't think it makes sense, turn it down." so I said "denied." Shot it back to the general, through the channels and so on. The next day, my supervisor got a telephone call and the guy was yelling at him, and he said "why don't you talk to Percy, he's sitting right over here." (Laughter) So he transferred the call to me. The general hollered at me for a minute. I said "general, I'd like to accommodate you but the numbers were all wrong. They didn't make any sense. If you looked at it, it wouldn't make sense to you. That's why I turned it down. If

you want to redo the contract, so that the number look correct, then we'll go back and take another look, but as of right now it's denied." And my supervisor said "That's fine, but if you want to go over my head and try to get him to agree with it, sir you can talk to him.

Break

PV: In the meantime, Sinclair Community College was getting ready to be organized as a community college because before I joined it, before I became a member of the faculty, it was still a junior college. It was known as a business college that David Sinclair organized in 1887. And it stayed that way for the better part of the it's life until Senator Charles Whalen, who was state senator, who ironically taught me at UD, and I did the same thing you're doing now, I interviewed him for a paper I was doing. He was the one who introduced the bill, ran it through the senate, and legislature and got the Governor to sign it and in 1966, Sinclair Business College became Sinclair Community College, one of the first in the state of Ohio. And so, I joined it 1966 as a part time instructor and in 1967 I became a full time instructor and I was there until, what, 1997, something like that.

LP: What did you teach?

PV: Economics. So it's been a very, very interesting life. Of course, before all that happened. Before I even finished college, I was already heavily involved in the Civil Rights Movement, stuff she was telling you. {Points at Rosalind.} One of the marches that I remember, was when....was it you [were] probably nine years old...but Martin was assassinated and we just, spontaneously, the black community just had a, we just going to have to march about this. So everybody in the community was called to say "would you please join us." I said, "yes, sir. We're going to be there." I don't even remember who called us. And I remember driving this old station wagon we had, it wasn't old, it was new station wagon at the time. It was new cause I was still paying on it. Drove over to where the Drew Health Center is now, that was a Kroger store.

LP: This is here in Dayton?

PV: Yes, over on Third Street. In fact over on Paul Lawrence Dunbar Street, right down the hill from where his house is. And so, there were five of you at the time cause Maura hadn't been born yet. Your baby brother, Claude, was literally a baby. He was one year old. He was in the stroller. We drove over there, got everybody out, the march was organized and we started marching. My wife would push the stroller and when one of the

babies got tired, I'd pick them up. They got very heavy, so we kept marching. And we marched all the way downtown across the Third Street bridge, downtown. At that time, Sinclair--was the first hole was still being dug--it was under construction. The first building that was going up, building 10, which is now building 10. The _____ building, but across the street from it was the Montgomery County building. And as we crossed the bridge, and we were singing various kinds of Civil Rights songs and so on, I started to look up and on top of the Montgomery County Building I saw the first marksman, police marksman with high powered rifles. Down the street from the Montgomery County Building was the police station. Dayton Police Station. And they had people on top. Catty-corner from that was the old Post Office on the other side of the YWCA, on Third Street. And they had marksman. On every high building, or tall building, they had police marksmen, in case someone got out of sorts, riots started, and that's what we were mostly afraid of. And I looked....

LP: That it would turn violent?

PV: Yes. And I looked at my wife and I said, "Honey, I think we are in the middle of something. Look up. They will shoot us if somebody gets out of place." And we just kept on singing and just kept on marching until we got down to Courthouse Square. And we had our speeches and we had our songs and we dispersed. That was the first, that wasn't the first Civil Rights March, this was like our 3rd or 4th.

RO: Cause I can remember when I was about four, pushing a stroller.

PV: Yes. Those were some scary times and we had number of incidents during that period, during the 60's that could have gotten out of control. In fact we did have one of our riots here, in 1966. Yes. '66.

LP: How did that start?

PV: You know, hardly anybody even knows. We know it started up there on lower Third Street, not lower Third Street but on the west side of the 3rd Street bridge And it just worked its way up. I believe it started with a policeman who [was] just...afraid of something...and he shot a black man. Or at least that's what we heard. And the whole community just went wild. The National Guard was called in by [Governor] Rhodes. And they started setting up roadblocks on major bridges that connected this side of town with downtown. Cause I remember I was still working at Wright-Patterson at the time and Mrs. Davis, Mattie Davis, one of the matriarchs of the Civil Rights movement in Ohio had to ride with me and I'd pick her up in the morning and we would drive out to Wright Patt. and I'd drop her off at the

building she worked at and I would go to my building and every evening I would bring her home. And this one evening, since we were still living over on, in Dunbar Manor Apts., coming across the Silver Street bridge. And we were told to stop. And this young, fresh-faced National Guardsman said, Where are you going? and I just totally lost it. I said "God Damn it. I am going home. And I am taking this lady back to her family. We live here." I guess that startled him because the usual response is that I'm going to reach for something...gives him an excuse to shoot you. I just said " God Damn it. I am going home. and this is where I live. So if you want to search the car, search the car, but you going to let me go. I'm going home to my family." His startled look told me that he was more scared than I was. He said, "you go on ahead, sir. And he waved me on through. and I was totally out of sorts when I got home. I said to my wife you know, and I just went on and on and on. I said this has got to stop. And in a few days, the rioting and the looting and the burning stopped and things went back to normal. But Third Street, from the bridge on up past Roosevelt High School all the way to Gettysburg, when the VA is, was a thriving, business, black business community. With all kinds of entrepreneurs, we had doctors there who were Jews, we had white doctors there, we had black doctors, we had dentists, we had small businesses of all kinds there. You go there now, you won't find any. Roosevelt is closed. And all because of that.

LP: It just never recovered from the riot?

PV: Yes, and there was some doubt even though, the city directed organization, I think they are called...have something to do with the Centennial Celebration of Flight [at Wright State University] in an effort to try to revitalize that part of the community. Even some of them, doubt it will come back or the whole area could come back to the way it was, or exceed it. Cause we need to exceed what we had. Because they just don't know what kinds of plans to draw up to recreate the vitality of that community, and now it's part of this, it goes both ways. So that was a very, very difficult time for us. And of course it didn't help things that five years earlier that John Kennedy, who we thought of as the champion, was assassinated. And then of course two months after Martin was assassinated, John Kennedy's brother, Bobby, was assassinated. And it just went on and on. People said there's no hope. They are killing off our leaders. And course, that was when the Vietnam war started, well not really started, it started back in '54 when I was a young marine. We forget that. But it went on and on and on for twenty years. People only remember that period of time between 1965 when Johnson escalated the number of troops in Vietnam until 1974 when we ran out of there, because there was nothing else we could do. But it had been going on for a long time before that. There was a lot of turmoil, a lot of confusion, a lot of

hurt, and we kept marching for as long as we could to bring some order, to bring some change about. Some we did, and in other cases we failed, but coming into the '70's was a trip all onto itself, because the 70's were just a decade of confusion, as far as I'm concerned, I mean they....(laughter)

LP: Let me ask you a question. You said at the march there were snipers on the roof and you looked at your wife and said "we're in the middle of something". Did you ever lose that...it obviously stayed with you...did you ever feel afraid for your life?

PV: Oh, yes. many times.

LP: I mean more than...you specifically...not as part of a group?

PV: Yes, because my children were with me and I was more afraid for them than I was for me. Having been in uniform, having faced danger before, I was used to it. I wasn't used to the idea of being so helpless. Cause there was nothing I could if they started shooting.

LP: Just watch it happen?

PV: Yes. Hell, it would have been like Soweto, in South Africa, when the police just fired into a bunch of unarmed kids and killed a bunch of them. Like they were dogs. And here we were in the very same position and we had policemen who had no concern whatsoever for anybody in the black community. And today, you're talking about today, 2003, still only 12 percent of this police force is African American. Back then, it was worse. But I consider any change, not so much for the better. Because almost half on the population of this city is African American.

LP: Wait a minute here. Hold on. So you have to be an African American to care about African Americans?

PV: No. No. But I think the problem was exacerbated in the 1970's, particularly after we filed the suit, I think. I don't think it was the major cause of the changes that took place. But even some of the...our white constituents began to move out. I look at my parish now, at St. Agnes. Back when I joined it in 1966, and became a fulltime member in 1967,...June and her family, and us and the Randalls, were the only black parishioners there. Now, with a smaller parish, it's still that way for the most part. There are a few more of the African Americans who live in the area who come there, but most of the neighborhood has changed to over ninety-five percent African American. Where before, almost 40 years ago, you're talking about a thriving, middle class, working class group of people

who ...the neighborhood was just alive. But when whites started to move out, and African Americans replaced them. Many African Americans who that part of Dayton, were poor or were middle class, and the middle class who initially moved in there of course, have moved out to Trotwood and Jefferson Township, even some you'll see up here in Englewood. And those who followed, like us, came in here and of course, almost overnight the white homeowners here...left. So, what was happening ...or what resulted is what we have now. So you have a city, which not only is growing more and more African American...but also poorer and older which doesn't allow for a thriving community to emerge. Because the tax base is down. In spite of the presence of some of us who do pretty well in retirement and some who are still working and not enough young, white and African American middle class who are up and comers, who are making the bucks, are moving in.

LP: The people with the energy. The middle part...

PV: Yes, they're moving out the Centerville, they're moving to Englewood, they're moving to the furthest, western edges of Trotwood, and Jefferson Township. They're moving to Huber Heights. Those who could...help...aren't here. And they have the absolute perfect right to do this. So rather than the situation getting better...I think it has sort of it has evened out.

LP: Stalemate?

PV: We don't know if we are going to regress or move forward. And we have to move forward because that's what we were marching for ...40 years ago. It's still frustrating and I'm older and wiser now.

{He has left the room to return in a minute. He has an article from the newspaper featuring a short biography of _____ }

Dean Loveless
(Dayton City Commission)

PV: And when we were still living in Dunbar Manor, the Catholic Interracial Council, which was one of the Civil Rights organizations here in Dayton, had organized a cross home visit program, much as Judge Rice began to or three years ago along with and Dean Loveless where people would visit each others homes in different parts of the community and would talk and get to know each other and so on. He [] was stationed at Wright Patt. at the time and he apparently had asked one of the members of the Catholic Interracial Council at a meeting or something, at one of the houses over there, Page Manor, he would love to meet a Dayton family and ...just to have a good home cooked meal. Because while he was stationed there and was busy with the astronaut program and he just never able to meet anybody, so when she mentioned that at a meeting, I

generally
abbreviated
to Pat.

said well have him come over a meet with us. The kids are around and he'd be able to relax and watch a football game or whatever. So he came over and we just had a great time that afternoon. And it was only later, after I told the kids, Do you know who this man was? Course a year later, he quit the astronaut corps, because one guy stood in his way, preventing him from going into space. Cause he should have been one of the original seven. The right stuff?

LP: Yes.

PV: Well, General Chuck Yeager, first man to break the sound barrier, from the South, nixed him and that's why he became angry and left the military and left the astronaut corps. Now he is a very famous portrait artist from what I understand and does very well. He travels all over the world with some of his stuff.

LP: From being an astronaut to a Master of Fine Arts. Both ends of the spectrum.

PV: We had a great time with him and I always remembered him and a couple of weeks ago when I saw that in the paper I said i have to set that up. We met some interesting people and had some interesting people drop by the house...

LP: What's it like to be stopped and questioned as to your right to drive this car or be in this part of town?

PV: It's happened several times and I try not to be too strident about it or give back a snide remark but one of the first times it happened was over on the UD campus I was leaving the campus that evening to catch the bus, cause I just finished teaching class over there. I was a graduate student at the time. I had just finished teaching class and had an armload of books and papers and etc...I'm walking towards Brown Street and these two cops are driving up "K" street before it was blocked off and they stopped. I just kept walking. One of them said "Hey, boy, c'mere. I went over and I said "yes sir what can I do for you." And he saw me with an armload of books and he says 'what are you doing over here?" and the thought that occurred to me was "well I'm stealing books" but I didn't want to say that. (laughter)

LP: You were tired and you wanted to go home?

PV: Yes. I said, well I just finished teaching class. I go to school here. I'm a graduate student here and I'm getting ready to go home. Is that alright?

He didn't know what else to say. He just looked at me with a blank expression. And I guess the only thought that came to him was, "yeah, you just go on." Because when I thought about it later, I thought this is a guy, redneck, who obviously doesn't think that black people can think.....

END OF SIDE B, TAPE ONE

LP: He doesn't think that black people can think....

PV: Or capable of doing anything or accomplishing anything, more than being a janitor or whatever. We can't be teachers or engineers or a whole lot of other things. It wasn't the first time that it hit me that there were a number of these kinds of guys around. But in later years when the same things were happening, not in, well I guess they were in overt ways anyway. The last incident I had with a cop was up here on Gettysburg. It was Saturday, so I had my old clothes on. I was driving this old beat up car that I had before I bought this one. And I was driving up to Riverview cleaners to pick up my clothes. There was this old truck was driving in front of me and he wasn't moving very fast, going about 25, and the speed limit up there is 35. So I checked my mirror to make sure nobody was at my side, and sped around, and got in front of him and slowed down to 35, because the cleaners was half a block away. Lights come on, I drive into the parking lot and park. And this young, fresh-faced cop looks at me and said, "Sir, may I talk to you a minute?" I said "Sure, what can I do for you officer?" He said "You were going 40 in a 35 mile an hour zone." I said "That's hard to believe because I was just trying to get around the gentleman with the old truck there. And I check my speedometer and it looked like I was within the speed limit. I was just trying to get in front of him so I could come in here and get my clothes." He said "You were driving 40 miles an hour." I said "Well, if you say so. So what are we going to do?" He said "Well I have to write you a ticket. Can I see your license?" I pull out my license. Then he had the nerve to ask me 'what do I do?' and that's when I had my fun. I pulled out some more identification. Well I teach at Sinclair Community College. I teach economics. I've been doing it for 30 years. Is there anything else that you'd like to know about me? So he punched in my license into his computer and of course it came back `no citations, no anything...

LP: No warrants for your arrest?

PV: He said I got to write you a ticket. I said "officer, go right ahead and right the ticket. Now if you don't mind while you are writing the ticket and checking out my car, I'm going to go into the cleaners here, get my clothes and I'll sign the ticket when I come out. Okay? Is that all right with you? I'm not going to leave until you say it's okay. I was just trying.... He said

"Go right ahead." So I went in, I got my clothes, and the lady that works there said "what's going on?" I said He says I was speeding. Do you think I'm going to argue with him? I'm going to agree with everything he says." Cause I don't think you want an incident in your parking lot. So I went back out. Put my clothes in my car. Came back to the car. I said "can I have my license back please? and my other identification... Do you have the ticket written? "Not yet." Go right ahead, Take your time. When he was done, I sign it. He said, "what else do you do? I said, "I do a number of things, but my principal occupation right now is college professor. That's what I do. That's what I am." And his face got red, beet red. And I said "Can I have my ticket sir, I've got to go home. I've got some things I've got to do today." He gave me my ticket and he just sat there for a minute. I said, "Thank you, I guess he wasn't used to people thanking him for a ticket. Thank you very much." Went down the next day and paid it. I could have challenged it and forced him to come into the courtroom and defend his actions but I said "What for? It cost me 15 bucks. That was cheaper than taken the day off from my work. Going down to court, paying court costs, embarrassing him, embarrassing myself, and the court, and it's not necessary. But those are the kinds of things that often occur and guys like that, in my estimation, simply don't understand the import and the impact of their behavior. How they look to the rest of us. Now, if I had been just some guy driving an old car, the first thing he would have thought, of course, was that he was a drug dealer. Cause he's driving an old beat-up car. He doesn't have temporary tags, cause that's a dead giveaway. He says he is a college professor. Don't believe that until I showed him the identification and he checked the license. They often times are going to expect either verbal retaliation or physical retaliation which gives them permission then to take retaliation back and they can logically and rightfully claim to those who would be judging them, because most likely they going to be white grand jurors. Say I did what I had to do because he was threatening.

LP: That he [the black man] provoked it?

PV: Like the gentleman down here in Kentucky a few months ago. He was handcuffed with his hands behind his back. Two police officers were getting ready to take him and he, according to one of the policeman who shot him, 12 times. He made a lunge at me and it made me afraid for my life. The grand jury agreed with him. Not one word was said about why a man with handcuffs behind his back, was shot 12 times because he was menacing a police officer. Okay? But that's the thinking and those who would judge them are not going to be heard, or people like her. It's going to be people who are their peers, mostly white, who are going to say, yes he was being menaced, yes he was dangerous, yes.... and they know they are going to get away with it. It has been very, very, very,

seldom that a white police officer shoots a black man and was locked up for it. The only reason that those two cops out there [in Los Angeles] that beat up on Rodney King, got put in the oscowl for ten years was because they had eighteen other policemen watching them do it. And there was a guy videotaping it. And they can't say well we didn't do it, cause he [Rodney King] was on his knees, trying to cover up. He was no longer dangerous, so they tried to beat him to death. And the whole world saw it. And of course, their lawyers, obviously being lawyers, are going to say 'well you didn't see the whole videotape and how he had lunged out of the car at the policeman and all of that...and he's a big guy. I said please give me a break for having some intelligence. But that's how they think. Not only can they act in any way that they feel like but they will get away with whatever heinous act they will commit against a non-white because a jury of their peers will let them go. But now all that's changing but many of them still don't get it and their still behaving and acting out. Now they're being locked up...no, we're not going to do that anymore.

LP: You think it is changing?

PV: I think it is. It's not changing fast enough, cause these guys still don't get it. But now, with the "new sheriff in town" all over the place. If you do it, we'll lock you up. We'll take your badge and your gun and everything else. Going to get locked up. Chief McManus has said so right here. 'I don't want any bad cops on my force.' And if you think you're going to misbehave, I'm going to do everything I can to get you off this force. That was one of his first meetings, with all the policemen. He said "If you can't behave professionally, you can quit now. You can leave now." Now the police union is angry at him. They don't agree with many of the changes he's making. But he had the temerity to bring in two African American higher up officers from out-of-town. He didn't pick from the group that was eligible, he brought them in from out of town and he promoted a couple from within the ranks to high positions. And the F.O.P. [Fraternal Order of Police] is very upset at him. But that's good. Cause here's a man who worked in a very large city, well capital of the country, which was...what...80% African American, and the majority of the police officers were black. So he had to learn how to maneuver, not only to play the politics and to understand who he was dealing with and the type city that he was sworn to protect. And here we are now. It's a new day. And some of these guys are trying to struggle...trying to catch up. And that, I think, is part of what we were trying to move towards with all the demonstrations and all the... across the table conferences and so on...and back then it was a lot more difficult ...cause you talking about guys who were part of a police force who were more than 95% white. Who were used to doing things your own way. Where the chief of police would look the other way if they roughed up somebody or even, God forbid, kill

somebody. And they knew they could get away with it. There was an incident back in...what?...1963-64. Barbie? Black engineer. He was walking downtown, walking south on Ludlow. An at that time, this was a...well...the building that sits across from City Hall wasn't there. There were a number of other buildings there and there was a Chin's restaurant downstairs. The Chin who runs Chin's downtown, I believe, is his grandson. And Barbie was walking down the street, middle of the night, minding his own business. These two cops saw him and they started following him and they yelled at him and told him to stop. And of course, again, back then, the attitude of a black man ...when you saw a cops, especially in the middle of the night, you try to get away as quickly as you can. You don't stop and have a conversation with them. So he ran. They sped up. One of them got out of the car. Told him to stop. "we'll shoot" and the man got scared. And he was gunned down like a common thief. And they said "well we thought he had a gun." What they thought was a gun was a pipe pouch, you know, that guys used to carry on their belts. And that's what he had there, and he liked to smoke a pipe. So when they reached the body, back in the bad old days, I guess, all cops had that extra gun inside their socks, one of them pulled out his extra gun and stuck it in his hand.

LP: So this gentleman, Barbie...

PV: Bob Barbie was his name.

LP: They weren't...looking for somebody...they just happened to cross him...middle of the night....they're not looking for anybody...

PV: Black person wasn't supposed to walk around downtown in the middle of the night. You had no business down there.

LP: So they plant a gun...?

PV: They plant a gun. Of course the story was...Robert Barbie...shot down in the street and so on. Upon further investigation they find out that he is a highly respected engineer out at Wright Patt. He had a tobacco pouch and they wondered where that gun came from. The police force finally had to fess up 'well it was planted" 'cause all cops at that time carried that extra gun. And it was not one of the guns that was issued. In case they got into trouble themselves, they could always reach into their holster and blow the guy away. And they traced the origin of the gun all the way back and found out that it was this guy. What happened to the two cops? They were reprimanded and they retired with full pensions. End of story. Now, why were they allowed to get away with it? Those were the tenor of the times. That's what they did and no one was going to argue with them.

We had a demonstration downtown in front of police station the next day after they were exonerated. I was there. We marched in front of that police station saying 'these cops are racist. This is unfair. There was a cover-up.' Course that didn't.....then we went to the community police scene and all kinds of other changes that came about and so on.... And it took almost 40 years for us to get to the point where we are at, but as I said earlier we still have a police force that is only 12% African American even though the African American population in the City of Dayton is over 45%. And growing. You wonder if some of the present white members of the force in any case, still don't get it. And I'm of the impression that a vast majority of them still don't get it. Now fortunately, I have to commend Chief McManus, they have a strong leader now, whose going to take things under control and I think he's gong to work with it. I think you're going to see some wholesale changes particularly among those who can't take his kind of leadership. Who don't think that he's dong the right thing, whatever that means...where they're concerned. Changes....there have been a number, not nearly as many as we would like, but I think today, we are at a point in our history at least in Dayton, where we can move in one of two directions. We can either regress or we can move forward. My hope is that we'll move forward, but when you look at the leadership at the state level and at the national level, it makes me wonder. It makes me wonder.

LP: You talk about things that have improved...better than it was...getting around to my required question her.... The 'good life'? What did that consist of? Say 40 years ago? And what would be the good life now?

PV: I don't know that that question is easy to answer because my concept of the good life would probably be different than a lot of younger peoples concept of ... I'm sure that back then when I thought of a good life it would be college education for all my kids, living in a larger home, nice home. Have a good deal of money in the bank. My wife and I have the ability to be able to travel whenever the urge hit us. But today, I don't think those matter as much. At least as I've grown older, they have taken less and less of my attention.

LP: So what matters?

PV: My kids. My grandkids and how they are growing up. My ability to contribute to my community in whatever way I can. When I work with the levy council, I know that the decisions we make are going to be important to the citizens of this county because the county commissioner is going to take our recommendations and run with them. Whatever they are. The levy council is essentially responsible determining the size of the money that we have to distribute to the four major agencies that have to do with

citizen concerns like mental retardation developmental disabilities, like children's services, like the health community and thewhat's the other one? anyway there are four major agencies. Things like that help me to realize that there are a lot of needs that need to be met and only the government, at least the local government, can deal with those kinds of things to the level that it can. Not...monies coming in from other sources, all these agencies do get money from the state, federal government and so on. but the essential task is to take care of those who can't take care of themselves. And that's important to me. I'm also a member of the board of Premier Health Partners. Very important task that we have in terms of taking care of the health needs in this community. And making sure that the responsible agencies are there, for that to happen. So we worry about the number of doctors and nurses that we don't have. And we need more of. And the size of the health care bill from any families. Some can't afford to pay for it. And that becomes more important than "living a good life" whatever that means. I suppose if that means having more money, well I don't have a lot of that but I'm okay. I owe a lot of money but that's okay too, because when I die I don't have to pay it.
(Laughter)

LP: It's very personal. Since Margie [McLellan] asked that question, I've been asking that a lot ...of what did you think is the good life? And I have very different answers every time, every person I ask.. To some people it's very monetary, very tangible items, wealth. Others it's inner peace....something much more philosophical. So it runs the gamut.

PV: And I think as we grow older, those things that we used to attract us, or caused us to want to break our backs, work 20 hours a day if we could, do all of the things necessary to accumulate things, you come to the realization eventually that things aren't important. People are important. Your family is important. Your community is important. Your country is important. The citizens of this planet are important, and we are getting ready to blow away some of them. I almost lost a granddaughter over the weekend and I couldn't have handled that cause I already lost one grandchild. Her [pointing at Rosalind] oldest child. Okay? I was sitting here when the phone call came, and I couldn't even cry because I was so shaken up. Because my granddaughter lived through the experience, not a scratch on her, inside or out. Her car is demolished. But she walked out of it without a scratch. That's important to me, because in my humble opinion, no grandchild or child should precede their parents to the grave.

LP: It's inconsistent with

PV: The Law of Nature. You're upsetting the balance. And so those kinds of things become more important than the money I have in the bank. I used

to wake up, shaking, because I had so many debts, but as I grow older I said `to hell with it." When I die and I still have those same debts, guess who's going to pay for them? I won't care. All of this will go to the family. They can sell it, they can do whatever they want to with it. They'll have my bank account, they'll have my insurance policies, they'll have whatever remaining monies I have in my pension. And there's a lot of it. I just realized. I got my statement last ...couple of months ago...for the first five years of my retirement. I looked at that number and I said " That's more money than I've seen in my whole life!"

LP: All together...in one place...

PV: I spend... they estimate I have 27 more years. Because they have expanded the number of years that they expect ...retire at age 65...you going to live another 27 years. Females are going to live another 29-30 years. This is going to come into perpetuity. I said " I don't care, whatever debts I have, I don't care. But there was a time in my life that I said " I have to have everything in order. Got to have my debts paid, my kids through college, house paid for, and I can...but not any more.

LP: Should we end this? Okay. We are done.

END OF SIDE A, TAPE 2